

San Joaquin Valley lawmakers failed Wednesday in efforts to turn a San Francisco Bay Area water recycling bill toward the Valley's advantage.

Following heated debate and some political gamesmanship, a key House committee blocked Valley representatives from trying to add irrigation delivery provisions to the Bay Area bill. The unadorned bill comes to the House floor Thursday.

"If we're going to have a bill that affects the Bay Area, we ought to have a bill that helps the rest of the state, too," said Rep. Devin Nunes, R-Visalia.

Nunes and Rep. George Radanovich, R-Mariposa, brought five separate amendments designed to increase irrigation deliveries or, at the least, send a political signal about the Valley's water shortages. The proposals included suspending the Endangered Species Act and speeding construction of certain water delivery projects.

The House Rules Committee, an arm of the House Democratic leadership, blocked the proposed water delivery amendments by a series of largely party-line 6-5 votes. Rep. Dennis Cardoza of Merced was the only Democrat to support bringing the amendments to the floor, where the entire House could have voted on them.

"These are very serious issues for the people in the San Joaquin Valley," Cardoza said. "This is an urgent situation, and we have to move quickly."

The Rules Committee had previously blocked most other San Joaquin Valley water delivery proposals, primarily authored by Nunes. The committee is a crucial gatekeeper, as it determines what bills and amendments reach the House floor and which remain bottled up.

"You've shut us down every time," Nunes told committee members sharply.

But Rep. George Miller, D-Martinez, testified that the Bay Area Regional Water Recycling Program Expansion Act was an uncontroversial measure that enjoyed widespread state support and deserved routine approval without being burdened by unrelated Valley water provisions.

In particular, efforts to suspend federal environmental laws to promote water deliveries to farms are intensely controversial and opposed by the Obama administration.

The Bay Area legislation authorizes federal funding for water recycling work in Contra Costa County and the cities of Petaluma, Redwood City and Palo Alto. All told, the recycling projects are supposed to provide 2.6 billion gallons of water annually.

"Federal support for local water recycling projects is critical to our state's economic future," Miller said.

On Sept. 30, Miller's bill came up for a vote under rules designed for non-controversial measures. Led by Nunes, House Republicans rallied against it and blocked it from securing the two-thirds vote necessary.

Shortly afterward, Rep. John Campbell, R-Newport Beach, learned that a resolution he authored congratulating the University of California at Irvine's men's volleyball team for winning the 2009 national championship was blocked at Miller's behest.

Campbell said that when he confronted Miller about it on the House floor, he was told that this was the price he must pay for opposing a Bay Area bill.

"I don't understand why I got a kick in the pants," Miller told the rules panel Wednesday when asked about the incident.

The Bay Area bill is a sure bet to pass the House on Thursday, though it will provoke further debate over California water policy. Senate action is still required.